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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001022

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [JO](#)  
SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT MOVING, DELIBERATELY, ON REFORM BILLS

REF: A. 06 AMMAN 8908  
[1](#)B. AMMAN 528

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Classified By: CDA Daniel Rubinstein, Reasons 1.4 (B) & (D)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: With three weeks remaining in the current parliamentary session, Parliament will be hard pressed to pass all of the government bills still before it. Reform of political parties and municipal government, both cited as priorities by King Abdullah in his speech opening this session of Parliament (ref A), remain on the agenda. The municipal government reform bill will probably pass, but debate between the lower and upper houses will likely push it to the end of the session. END SUMMARY.

#### Municipal Government Reform Bill

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[1](#)2. (U) The government's municipalities bill, which will trigger municipal elections this summer, was amended and approved by the lower house and then referred to by the Senate. The Senate rejected most of the lower house's amendments on March 3, possibly setting the stage for debate in a joint session. Political observers expect this bill to be finalized before the end of the current session of parliament, which is programmed to run through March.

[1](#)3. (U) A key point of contention concerns the lower house's amendment allowing each municipal council to appoint the professional municipal manager (an official who has always served alongside each Jordanian mayor.) The Senate committee, and traditionalist MPs from both houses want to retain the government's original draft text stipulating that the Minister of Municipalities will appoint municipal managers. Debate continues as well over the details of the managers' authority.

#### Press and Publications

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[1](#)4. (SBU) Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Abdulhadi Majali reintroduced the press and publications bill for debate in the Chamber of Deputies on February 28. Led by security-minded MPs, and supported by Islamic Action Front members, the Chamber voted March 4 to approve the bill explicitly allowing imprisonment of journalists (earlier government-submitted drafts had vacillated on the subject of imprisonment). However, the bill as amended precludes detention of journalists prior to conviction, and provides for imprisonment for a substantially reduced scope of offences (see para six) than the current law. The bill now goes to the upper house, which is also likely to approve it.

[1](#)5. (SBU) As endorsed by the Chamber, the bill would eliminate imprisonment of journalists for expressing their

opinions, but would continue to allow journalists - like other Jordanians - to be imprisoned if convicted of religious defamation, public abuse of prophets, incitement of sectarianism or racism, and libel. Secretary General of the Chamber of Deputies Fayyez al Shawabkeh told poloff "Journalists should not be given greater immunity than MPs." Fines for these offenses would also be increased. NOTE: It has been several years since the government attempted to imprison a journalist. The power to fine has also fallen into disuse; two editors were threatened with fines after the Danish Cartoons controversy last year, but the government has taken no action in the case for several months. END NOTE.

¶6. (SBU) If the bill becomes law, it would remove from the press and publications law the current legal sanctions for the following offenses: disparaging the king and royal family; publishing information about the Jordanian Armed Forces; insulting foreign heads of state or heads of diplomatic missions in Jordan; encouraging perversion or moral corruption; publishing information on secret sessions of the parliament; articles that undermine confidence in the Jordanian currency; and articles that incite strikes. Some media observers, however, maintain that the penal code and state security law could still be invoked to try journalists for some of these actions.

#### Political Parties Law

¶7. (SBU) A Chamber of Deputies committee endorsed without amendment the government's draft political parties law. The bill would increase from 50 to 250 the minimum membership of an organization seeking recognition as a party, simplifies some registration procedures, and provides a mechanism for some government funding of parties in the future if a special regulation is enacted.

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#### Comment

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Pre-election posturing by MPs has used up much of the time available for productive debate on key issues. Stalling tactics and difficulties achieving quorums have slowed even bills that were GOJ priorities, including the four the King singled out in his speech opening Parliament -- municipalities, political parties, press and publications, and the freedom of information bills. Post expects the municipalities law to be passed, but the leadership in Parliament will have to carefully manage the time left this session if Parliament is to endorse some of the remaining bills. This will not be easy as MPs look to make political hay with hearings on corruption issues and work on other legislation. END COMMENT.

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